

**it hurts to miss you, but it's worse to know (that I'm the reason you won't come home)**

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# it hurts to miss you, but it's worse to know (that I'm the reason you won't come home)

by [noodleme](#)

## Summary

Shanks arrives on Karai Bari island, demanding a meeting with Buggy, his oldest friend and another Yonko to talk business and possible alliances. Yet everyone knows that the Red Hair has some hidden, personal agenda.

Buggy just needs to hold onto the power he acquired after proclaiming his desire to get the One Piece. And maybe, just maybe, set the record straight with his oldest enemy.

Hawk-Eyes is curious, Beckman is tired, Crocodile is angry and Alvida - surprisingly resourceful. What will happen at the end of this very long (and very stressful) day?

## Notes

soo Shuggy took over my life, possessed my body and made me write this. then along came Bughawk and I didn't know who to make the end game, and that's not mentioning the effect Cross Guild yuri on twt had on me. in the end this is very Buggy-centric mostly Shuggy fic. dare I say I'm quite happy how it turned out?

hope you enjoy!

// the title is from House in Nebraska by Ethel Cain (yes, it's one of those lowercase moody song quote titles, I can't help myself)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

...

See, Buggy knew that Shanks loved him. He wasn't sure in what capacity, but that was mostly caused by the denial on his part. In general, he knew. If Buggy had to guess (guessing wrong), Shanks loved the memory of him, his affections a reminder of their life on Oro Jackson.

Which was likely the reason why he found himself in an unfortunate situation quite literally in front of him. "Is that the Red Force on our horizon?" Galdino asked in a shaky voice next to him. Yes, Buggy thought, yes, it fucking is.

Shanks loved Buggy because they were once inseparable, because he felt responsible for him and because he had to make all the wrongs right. He loved to be the hero, loved to be the one to control fate, and Buggy was an anomaly. He didn't want or allow himself to be saved, and he didn't let Shanks' decide for or sway him whichever way Red Hair preferred.

Which is probably why the bastard's ship was swiftly approaching Karai Bari. Surely Shanks had come up with some more plausible reason, but if he had even two brain cells left to rub against each other, the other Yonko could recognise his own short-comings (read: believing he had any right to play a wise man with his track record).

Yes, Buggy thought bitterly, it was a good decision to leave him that terrible day in Loguetown. Shanks was all consuming - him dragging his crew half across the Grand Line to tend to his personal matters was the proof of it. He was selfish, but to his nakama it didn't matter, because once you got too close, his light would lure you in, like an ancient fish with a lightbulb on its head, swimming at the depths of the seas. Rayleigh told them about those when they were kids, and they were even planning to go diving looking for them. They never did.

In all these years, they met only a handful of times, but never like this. Last time Shanks directly intervened with Buggy's business ("boo hoo you can't threaten poor civilians, stop it Buggy please please please" or something along the lines) the Clown disappeared from his radar for ten years. Unlike the Red Hair, Buggy knew a thing or two about navigation so it wasn't that hard to lose his annoying tail, even in East Blue. Marineford was the next, and up until this morning, last time they saw each other.

Buggy pursed his lips. Served him right for playing a messiah. While Shanks would never admit, Buggy knew he judged him. He loved the idea of Buggy and resented the reality.

Yet, he would do anything to keep Buggy safe, because otherwise it would mess up Shanks' perception of himself. Who was Shanks if not the rugged good guy the viewer would

undoubtedly root for despite his questionable decisions?

So they were stuck in this cycle as victims of Shank's personality. (And maybe, something inside Buggy nudged at him, "and maybe because of your own as well"). This time it led them to this predicament, which could by all accords be described as "deep shit". "Fuck," Buggy mumbled under his breath.

"Why the fuck is he here?" the clown heard Crocodile ask behind him, voice annoyed. He didn't hear Mihawk join them at the observation tower, but judging by Galdino's louder than usual squeak and hurried retreat, both ex-warlords were present.

After his little One Piece-related performance, which undoubtedly touched even the hearts of such stoic assholes like Croc and Hawk-eyes, Buggy felt that they were getting somewhere. This time the frustration of his creditor was finally not directed at Buggy but at the red haired nuisance approaching them.

He still felt like answering. "I don't know. But we are not going to let him control the situation. He is here as a guest. And in our current state, whatever he wants to discuss is political by default."

Despite being visibly disturbed by Buggy's initiative, Crocodile didn't lash out. Baby steps, the clown thought, turning his attention to the ex-warlords words. "We can't stop them without starting an all out war, so we take action first, separate him from his crew, deceive and smooth-talk our way so he has to play an Emperor and not a pirate," Crocodile stated, turning to Mihawk. "If he tries anything, I'm expecting our resident swordsman wouldn't mind picking up that duel tradition of theirs."

"I am not fighting Red Hair," Mihawk said, point blank.

"It might be time you want to reconsider that," Buggy mumbled and turned to walk to the pier. If he averted his gaze a little later, he would've noticed an amused look playing on Crocodile's face and two golden-yellow eyes burying into his back.

...

"Hello old friend," the red-haired asshole exclaimed as his ship docked on their island. Before they could descend, Buggy put on his Emperor's voice and replied matching the other in volume.

"An ex-crewmate - perhaps, but let's not get too overly-familiar," a few gasps were heard coming from the crowd, or should he say a small army they had to quickly arrange on the beach.

Next to the clown, Mihawk raised a brow under his hat. What an unconvincing lie, he thought, recalling all the stories drunk Shanks has shared with him from his past. Credit where credit's due, he certainly skipped over a few details, even in his intoxicated state, but Mihawk was not a stupid man and could finish a picture for himself. The look on the Red Hair's face, trying for nonchalant but coming off softly desperate in his correct opinion, let Hawk-eyes confirm his assumptions.

While he was zoning out, Buggy went on a small tirade about coming to other Yonko's territories uninvited, and what that entailed. Through it, Shanks occasionally chimed in with small remarks that only seemed to rile up the clown further. "If you wish for an audience," he was finally wrapping up, "don't expect us to welcome your whole bunch here. Your best solution would be to find an ounce of self-preservation within yourself and go as you came. Knowing you, however, I shouldn't be expecting intelligent decisions to graze that red head of yours."

To his right, Mihawk saw Crocodile exhale a particularly large puff of smoke. The other ex-warlord seemed rather annoyed by the clown's unnecessary empty threats, which were definitely not his way to lead negotiations (since in Crocodile's opinion, threats should never be empty and always exceed the expectations).

However, as Akagami kept smiling, Crocodile smirked under his smoke in return. If Mihawk had to guess, the taller man saw Shanks' attitude as a weakness. The fact that Red Hair hadn't ordered his men to gun the clown down the second he dared to utter any of those words, was likely a display of pathetic charity in his business partner's eyes.

Shanks' second in command seemed to share the sentiment, as the redhead kept grinning. "Sorry, Bugs, you know how busy the life of a Yonko gets," he said, mischief playing in his eyes, as he added, "especially of the one going after One Piece."

Momentary silence fell over the bay. Mihawk was sure that this would be the moment the clown would start stammering and denying. However, in this undeniably rare case of miscalculation, he was wrong.

"Well, Shanks," Buggy said and the air around them grew colder. Mihawk stopped breathing. Why the fuck did he stop breathing? "I happen to know that you were taught better than to forget your manners the moment a passion project overcomes you. And this is all I can call this excuse, since *I* will be the one to claim One Piece. But I suppose, being a bigger person

will give some points to my rather fucked up karmic score, so I'll take pity on your complete lack of situational awareness. My subordinates here will show you to the meeting room, so you could state your case clearly." With that he turned on his heel, and started in the direction of the biggest tent on the island, there Cross Guild quarters were located.

Shanks opened his mouth, seemingly snapping out of whatever trance he was in, but Buggy interrupted him before the other could reply. "Oh, and guessing your next question, yes, you can bring Beckman, if you need adult's supervision. Shame for your other crewmates, though, as they are staying on your boat. *Wouldn't want to be in their position*, but alas it is what it is."

With that, the Emperor exited the stage. Mihawk met Crocodile's bewildered gaze with an intense stare of his own. That only lasted a millisecond, as both of them composed themselves from this ridiculous display of emotion. "Any additional remarks, Red Hair?" Crocodile grinned at the remaining captain.

Shanks' smile fell as he met eyes with Crocodile. "Not to you," he said and motioned for Beckman to follow him to the pier.

Now, that was very interesting, Mihawk thought. He would never admit it, but perhaps there was more entertainment in what a spectacle simple human emotions could provide.

...

Benn hated Buggy. In this moment in particular, but also in all those preceding. First time they had met was in some run down bar in East Blue. The clown had been hunched down on the bar stool, staring into nothingness, when their crew, led by Shanks entered the establishment. It had taken less than a second for his captain to spot the impossible blue of the other's hair, and completely freeze in his tracks.

Shanks had been just a boy back then, and so for a second, then his eyes had met Buggy's the myriad of emotions so deep and earnest had crossed both of their faces, that Beckman distinctly remembered thinking "Fuck no, I am too old for this shit". But Shanks wouldn't have been Shanks if even at 20 he hadn't had an impressive control over his expressions. Plastering a big care-free smile on his face, he had embarrassed the clown in a tight hug.

And, okay, maybe for those first 15 minutes after meeting him Benn hadn't hated Buggy. His face, buried in Shanks' neck was full of grief for what could have never been. And maybe at that moment Benn thought, how hard must it be to love Shanks.

However, in their following years he would find out for himself that it wasn't hard at all. And so his resentment for Buggy would grow. How did he dare make it so complicated when it was the easiest thing in the world? Sure, Benn's feelings were never romantic in nature, but what did it matter? Shanks' kisses didn't seem to turn Buggy into a frog (although Benn would argue that was because he already looked like one), so why did he make such a hassle out of it, the first mate didn't understand. He saw how much Buggy hurt Shanks but couldn't do anything to help his captain. And so all that was left was to pick up the pieces and stare daggers (pun intended) at Buggy's back as they followed him into the pompous tent.

So screw vivre cards and screw newspapers for reminding Shanks of the blue haired imbecile.

...

Shanks could admit to himself that he was out of his mind, on edge, wrathful, restless and disquieted because of the state he found Buggy's vivre card in. He had worked himself up, he knew. But also, he reasoned, it should have been almost impossible for the card to be as battered as he had found it.

After hearing the news that Buggy was after One Piece as well, he had felt a pang of melancholic nostalgia and longing that by this point he had learned to associate with his childhood best friend. Reminiscing, he had opened a bottle of rum and taken a box from under his desk with all the Buggy-related trinkets and possessions, vivre card included. To his horror, the latter was almost burned to a crisp when he had opened the box.

It took them two days to arrive on Karai Bari. And then 20 more minutes to get seated in the Cross Guild's meeting room. Shanks had an assumption of how this came to be, and the looming presence of two ex-warlords was not helping. Positioned on a soft velvet armchair across from him, Mihawk met his eyes in a response to the silent question. One of his oldest friends, his rival, who was always so concerned with the matters of honour. One who knew of his and Buggy's history.

He couldn't, could he? Asked the hopeful part of Shanks. He wouldn't dare, would he? Asked the other.

Hawk-eyes didn't give him the answer, as he turned his gaze towards Buggy, at the same time the latter clapped his hands to call for attention. The intrigue on the swordsman's face didn't escape Shanks. "Oh," he thought, "that doesn't look good either".

"So," Buggy's voice was less... less everything as he spoke. Tired, Shanks distantly thought. "Let's cut the bullshit, Red Hair, what's the reason you're here?"

Shanks knew not to show his hand ahead of time (or at all if possible). By his side Benn was a steadying presence, as he spoke, a lazy smile on his lips. "Well, Bugs, as I said-

"You didn't actually." That was Mihawk, adding unnecessary sassy remarks. A glass of wine already materialised in his hand, as he was undoubtedly grimly enjoying the situation unfolding in front of him. What boredom does to an old man, Shanks mused in his head. Though he supposed he wasn't the one to talk.

"That's right," Shanks stood up, helping himself to a glass as well. He preferred something stronger, but this was mostly for show and to even the ground, so he didn't mind the viscous taste of the drink as it entered his system. Benn looked like he was already regretting this day.

"I came here for two reasons," Shanks continued. "First, to see my oldest friend and congratulate him on his position as a Yonko, of course". To this Buggy rolled his eyes but didn't interrupt. "And second, to see what potential... *alliances* could lie between the Cross Guild and Red Hair pirates, now that we're united in our goal."

Buggy sighed, that restless energy seeping through him, coming back. That could only mean that his bluff was discovered. "I said cut the bullshit, Red Hair. And we're not united, in fact, we are anything but. From where I stand, as another Emperor, you are my rival and enemy -"



“Which stands for the whole of the Cross Guild, *unless* you start making more sense,” Crocodile interrupted, promptly shutting Buggy up. Shanks didn’t like the implication of it, or Crocodile himself for that matter, not one bit. So he ignored him.

“What about not as an Emperor?” Shanks inquired, deciding to show, what he thought, was one of his trump cards. “You know, I have always cared for Buggy more than for Buggy the Star Clown or Buggy the Genius Jester, or...”

“You shouldn’t have,” Buggy cut him off. “Because if you did, you would’ve soon found out that these are the same person.” Okay, so this didn’t work at all, Shanks thought, his relaxed demeanour slowly changing. He was getting uneasy about this, and the two overly smug ex-warlords on either side of his best friend didn’t help.

“And as for all of them, you are simply a bane of our existence. A curse that is the worst of all, as I couldn’t shake it off for the past 25 years.”

“Perhaps then it would be wise to rethink that approach and not bring personal into political,” Benn suddenly said in an even voice, that Shanks knew his first mate wrongfully considered polite.

“Well, Benny,” Buggy started making Shanks ready to jump in as a mediator, when another person delivered the blow.

“I believe the choice of addressee for such suggestions to be misguided,” Hawk-eyes said, eyes zeroing in on Benn, before giving Shanks a quick once over.

“What,” his first mate started, and really, wasn’t Benn supposed to be the calm and collected one? Perhaps, Shanks underestimated his dislike for Buggy. Thinking back now, Shanks was pretty certain he did.

“Are you asking Hawk-eye to paraphrase in simpler words, or to point out the person he is so blatantly implying?” Buggy chimed back in. “If the latter, I can give you the generous amount of five guesses, but you’d be wise to start with the red headed idiot sitting to your

left. Would you like me to also point my finger in the direction or you can make Ls with your fingers and figure out left from right yourself, Beckman?"

"For the record, I do think you are giving him too much credit, Clown," now it was Crocodile's turn to pretend to be the smartest person in the room. Really, Shanks could see Buggy and him hitting it off so well, he started to worry his initial hunch was wrong. "I do think Red Hair's subordinate might need a dictionary to comprehend even the 5% of what any of us are saying which is why his comments were so utterly out of place."

"That's it," this was Shanks' turn to snap. Knowing Crocodile, he was prone to making calculated moves and keeping tabs on all of his potential enemies. So daring to say something like this, to a first mate of Red Hair pirates with Yonko for a captain, the ex-warlord must've been very sure in his own capabilities. Overestimating himself, in Shanks' opinion. To his credit, Benn seemed to regret ever talking to the bastards the second he heard an annoying and frankly extremely rude 'Benny' come out of Buggy's mouth, so he collected himself enough to bring his captain back to earth. Although, Shanks thought distantly, as anger was overtaking him, that might have been a tad bit too late.

"Buggy," he stood up again, walking up to his friend. In turn, the other man stood up as well and moved to the table with wine, away from Shanks. "I do not lie when I say I want an alliance with you. Unlike some, I don't forget my promises, so I want us to-"

"Unlike some?!" Buggy looked at him sharply. "What exactly do you mean by that? And please, you might not forget them, but you certainly have no trouble breaking them."

"Captain," Beckman started but was too late. "What do *you* mean?" Shanks raised his voice as well. "You left me! You promised we would always be friends," distantly he heard Crocodile's chuckle but he didn't care. "Remember? You said I could count on you."

"Oooh, and that you did. That's exactly what you did, didn't you, Shanks? Always expecting me to have your back. Well this goes both ways, buddy! You betrayed me, betrayed my trust, my loyalty. All these years ago, we were supposed to claim the One Piece together!"

"And we still can!" Shanks pleaded, reaching for him. "No!" Buggy waved his arm, frantically, knocking his own hat off. "Because you are not who you think you are. You are not a hero, Shanks..."

“I never-”

“And you are not my friend. Because the boy who I called that wasn’t a coward. Because my friend wouldn’t have run, he wouldn’t have stained the memory of his Captain. But now I know better than to believe that this boy ever existed”.

Buggy was shaking with anger. Shanks saw the tears picking at the other's eyes, but he couldn't cry with him. He felt hollow. “Coward, traitor...” he said in a low voice, “you are the only person who calls me that, and yet I still find myself believing you over anybody else. I’m done with that. Do you have any idea what Roger expected of us? Of what he expected of me? I was a kid too you know, and I was left alone by the only family I ever had. With what? A promise to make Captain’s dream a reality.”

“Didn’t we already establish you were shit at that?”

“Shut. Up.” Shanks felt his haki slowly slip out of his control. Mihawk and Beckmann both called out for him, the former having a dangerous note to his voice. But Shanks would apologise to Benn later, and for now he simply did not care what Hawk-Eyes thought.

“I’m sorry you were hard on yourself,” Buggy furrowed his brows at that. “I’m sorry Roger didn’t tell you what he told me, and I’m sorry I gave up on our dream for that. I’m sorry I failed you.” Shanks came closer grabbing Buggy’s face in his hand. The other man winced, Red Hair’s grip iron tight on him. “Come to Laugh Tale with me,” Shanks was cheating, he knew, but in that moment he let more of haki manifest, for his conviction to wash over Buggy completely.

His friend was staring at him, eye contact unbreakable. “What did the Captain ask of you?”

Shanks swallowed. “I can’t tell you, not...Not now,” he glanced behind them before returning his full attention to Buggy again. “Come with me.”

Buggy was silent, Shanks felt like he had to give him the final push. “Blackbeard... you were right about him you know? I didn’t see it but *you* did. We need to stop him, he can’t put his hands on Captain’s treasure.”

Behind them he felt two pairs of amber eyes burrowing into his back. Yet no one dared move.

Buggy was still silent, so Shanks took the moment to take in the face in front of him. As he eased his grip on Buggy cheek, opting to rub smooth circles over his cheekbone, he studied his features. Beautiful cascade of the truest blue of his hair adorned his love's face. His eyes, searching, got a greener shade to them under the candlelight in the room. Then Buggy's nose, his nose that Shanks had honestly always found adorable, since they were kids, mainly because of the way Buggy would scrunch it if you kissed him directly on it. And his lips, plush of them inviting, calling for Shanks to lean in and seal the deal.

“Who are you asking to join you?” Buggy whispered to him. “Me or the Cross Guild?”

The gaze on his back became colder, almost piercing through the overwhelming presence of his haki. Distantly, Shanks heard the sound of Yoru being unshed, a gun cocking. A whisper of sand starting to slowly make its way to his feet.

Shanks did not care.

“You. Buggy, I’m asking you. It has always been you.”

“Is this why you came, Shanks? Why not make less of a scene if you have a private question?” A soft smile grazed his lips.

Shanks chuckled, letting the tinge of care get into his voice as he spoke. “I came because I was worried about you. Your vivre card, it almost burned down. I knew something was wrong, and now I can see that I was right. But I will get you out of here, and-”

“Will you now?”. And suddenly the tension broke.

...

Everyone froze as the atmosphere in the room shifted to something more sinister. The moment Buggy asked that question his face darkened. Something was prickling at Shanks' neck and as he looked behind him he met eyes with Mihawk and Crocodile.

Hawk-eyes expression was a sight to see. He looked ready to devour someone, hungry for blood or perhaps something else entirely. On his part, Crocodile was absolutely gleaming, bemused expression highlighting the mirth in his eyes. And while the latter man wasn't known to have a poker face, something about his expression felt unnaturally raw, both of them looking like a cord was just snapped inside of them.

Shanks couldn't understand. So he did what seemed to be the only reasonable thing which was look at Benn. As he cocked his head to the side of the exit, the look in his eyes said verbatim: "This. Was. A. Trap."

Shanks snapped his head back to meet Buggy's eyes already looking at him. The impossible blue of make up around them, the clashing of red lipstick below, suddenly the colours became overwhelming.

This is when Shanks realised. Buggy's eyes weren't searching before, they were calculating.

...

"You know, I must admit the sad childhood part would've been impressive if, one, I wasn't *there*, and two, it didn't sound an awful lot like 'I'm sorry I was a prodigy you could never stomach to be'. And that thing you said about Blackbeard, oof, you know I love a good 'I told you so' moment," Buggy's voice shook with rage that had overtaken him.

"However, what does need some room for improvement is sticking to the bit and not admitting to another one of your pity outbursts. You are shameless in your disrespect."

“Buggy-”

“Don’t even try,” his full body was shaking but after enduring that whole speech with all of his limbs attached Buggy decided that he did actually deserve another hissy fit for the day. “You said it yourself. You came here to save me. From whom may I ask? I’m a goddamn Emperor!”

As Shanks’ gaze moved behind them, Buggy became hysterical. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” He was laughing, although Shanks didn’t seem to grasp the humour. “These are my subordinates! What are they gonna do?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Buggy saw Crocodile narrow his eyes at him. ‘Careful now,’ read the expression. Buggy decided to read it for what it was - a bluff. Crocodile didn’t make empty threats, but he’s a funny guy if you get to know him, really. Buggy wasn’t even pushing his luck, he was just expecting Croc to be a reasonable business man he claimed to be.

The show must go on, he thought, turning back to Shanks, who looked as unnerved as Buggy felt. “What? Any ideas? Perhaps Mihawk will ask me nicely, that sounds a lot like him, ‘Please, Captain Buggy, may we engage in some harmless roleplay where I slice you and dice you, and you pretend as if I could kill you by, well perhaps, the power of conviction and my friendship with Shanks’,” Buggy imitated Hawk-eyes’ always stoic expression. But now that he thought about it, his face was more dead-pan than anything. In the end, Mihawk was one funny guy as well.

“And Crocodile? The man basically handed me my empire on a silver plate. I don’t know why he suddenly decided to become a sugar daddy, but who am I to complain? If this bites me in the ass one day, well, what is of your concern? My back regions have nothing to do with you starting this point onwards. Why you may ask? Because on top of basically calling me a helpless imbecile and proclaiming yourself messiah, you also **dared to use your haki to try and *make me follow you.***”

By the end of his speech Buggy returned to the couch he shared with Crocodile at the start of that meeting. God, that felt like ages ago. He hid his face in his hands to quietly continue laughing. Honestly, they should’ve invited Shanks themselves with how much the guy could liven up the party.

“Buggy,” he heard Shanks call out to him. He shook his head, refusing to lift it. “Buggy,” here it came again. Buggy wouldn’t bulge, he wouldn’t-

“Captain,” another voice came in and Buggy’s head snapped up. Somehow, the situation didn’t seem so funny anymore.

Mihawk, who called out to him, was watching him intently. When Buggy turned his head, he saw Crocodile share the same look. Well, maybe that was it. “Good thing,” Buggy distantly thought, “that I started sneaking in some Buggy balls in my pockets to these fucking meetings. If I get lucky, maybe I can take out at least one of these three bastards. Or Benn. Or Shanks’ remaining arm. Maybe I will indeed go out with a bang”.

Making peace with his impending demise, Buggy turned his head back to the swordsman. “Yes, Hawky?”

Amusement briefly crossed Hawk-Eyes’ face. *Huh* . “I was going to tell you to take your conqueror’s haki down a notch, before you permanently injure our guests. However it seems like you got that under control yourself just now, so perhaps Beckman can live another miserable day under such efficient leadership.”

Buggy chuckled, before registering the meaning behind Hawk-Eyes words. “What?” he softly mumbled.

“Buggy-” Shanks raised his voice again.

“Take a hint, Red Hair,” Crocodile practically barked. “It’s over. Get out,” he moved to kick their guests out, but as soon as he opened the door a heavy curtain of rain was presented in front of them.

A storm was raging outside, sounds of thunder being heard in the distance. Crocodile grimaced, looking for someone to pass the responsibility of seeing the Red Hair pirates out. The streets were in disarray, people running around, trying to save their possessions from the

approaching weather disaster. “Daz,” Crocodile demanded, and no second later the man in question materialised in front of him. “Take our... guests back to their ship, and see that they leave the island immediately”. The ex-warlord ignored Benn’s rising protest, continuing, “Surely an Emperor and his crew can take care of themselves in a little drizzle. It’s not like this is their first day on the Grand Line”.

“Right,” Shanks said coldly. It felt like all desire to fight had left him, even when Crocodile was unarguably acting like a complete asshole.

He beacons for Beckman to stand up, as he moved in the direction of the door.

In retrospect, Buggy didn’t know why he did what he did. Something didn’t sit right with him, making him feel like he miscalculated. He shouldn’t have felt like this. He practically destroyed Shanks, rubbed it in his face how much of a bastard Red Hair had been, showed him that he could see through all of his pretences right at the bottom of his selfish, controlling being. Yet something was wrong. In the way that Shanks looked at him, spoke, touched. Something was deeply and undoubtedly broken.

So Buggy used the last bit of his luck, to raise his voice and say, “They can stay”.

Shanks snapped back to look at him, and so did Crocodile. Two very different emotions, but both not promising anything good. Buggy cleared his throat. “You can stay docked on your ship. No need to go to the open sea”.

“Clown,” Crocodile said, commanding.

“What? It’s not like he can hurt us.” *It’s not like he will hurt me.* “Better keep an eye on him here, instead of letting him roam our territories unsupervised in these unfavourable conditions”.

The reasoning was half-baked at most. It was true that the pirate of Shanks’ caliber could use the storm to his advantage, since it would disproportionately affect the smaller Cross Guild pirates already in the sea or inhabitants of their other islands. Still even Buggy could see that



he was reaching - at the end of the day the sea was unforgiving and unpredictable to everyone.

However, for whatever reason, Crocodile gave in, which he did less than never. A tense atmosphere fell over them when the two pirates led by Daz had left.

...

When Crocodile was sure Shanks was far enough he angled his hook just right to be able to stab Buggy in the eye in one swift motion.

Clown stood up just as fast, putting distance between them. Annoyingly, he didn't start begging. "If you touch me he will know. And if he knows, I say it's 50/50 Hawky here will be willing or able to stop him," was what he said instead.

Frown on Crocodile's face darkened, acquiring that cruel upward tilt.

"Now, Clown, didn't I just hear you say you won't take any help from Red Hair? I shouldn't have doubted your utter lack of self-respect: the moment he's out of the door you are backtracking already".

Buggy had the audacity to lift his eyes, staring his business partner down, and smirk.

Whatever self preservation he had, was gone out of the window. How unfortunate for him - putting a brave face on would not save him from Crocodile's wrath especially after his most recent performance.

Still smiling, Buggy shook his head. "Jumping to conclusions, how unsurprising," he quickly moved to the side, escaping Crocodile's hook that the latter finally swung at him. "I'm not saying that to threaten you, Croc," he begrudgingly corrected himself. "I am simply stating what is about to happen, because I know what kind of person Shanks is. Unfortunately for you, I am the only one standing between him and you right now. So if something was to happen to me, anything that could be seen on my vivre card, he'd recognise the threat immediately. In which case, he'll realise I was lying and covering for you. And do you honestly believe him to be reasonable enough to listen to me after that?"

"Oh, did you expect to be alive after that? Is that why you keep Red Hair here? So he could run in and save you should my kindness finally run its course? I can guarantee you, Clown,

even he won't be fast enough. I'll bury this whole island down before he as much as steps foot off his ship".

"In this weather?" Mihawk's voice came in, catching Crocodile by surprise. He slowly turned his head to where the other man was refilling his glass. "Now, Hawk-eyes, think carefully before replying, but whose side are you on, exactly?"

"On the side of reason. Which is a very lonely place to be, in this company," he said, taking a sip. Before Crocodile could respond, the swordsman turned his attention to the clown.

"What I'm wondering is, where was all this pride when you were crying and begging on the floor? And couldn't you keep it down a little longer instead of rejecting a potentially very valuable ally."

"What pride are you even talking about," Crocodile replied instead. "Didn't you hear: he kept Red Hair here to save his sorry ass, should we finally commit a much needed treason. Poor idiot is wrapped around his finger. You know, Buggy, you really do deserve each other, a coward and a fool."

Buggy's face got incredibly red, before he let out an almost primal, frustrated scream, detaching his hand and grabbing a wine glass from Hawk-Eyes' hand only to try and smash it over Crocodile's head. If the latter wasn't furious before he was absolutely fuming now. All precaution aside, he was going to murder the clown. In his fury an idea formed in his head. They could put the blame on Shanks. Easy. The bastard was still there, and they could say he killed Buggy in a fit of... fit of whatever. He did not fucking care. He would kill one asshole and frame the other one, taking out both and becoming the true leader of Gross Guild in the public eye. In one swift motion he wrapped his sand around the clown swiftly moving towards him. Crocodile wanted to see light leaving his eyes up close.

Before he could do that though, Yoru was raised to his chin, dangerously close to his jugular. Eyes still trained on the clown, he ordered. "Put that down, Mihawk."

"No." Cunt.

"Why do we have to do this?" Came strangled response from Buggy. "I'm so fucking tired. Why do you have to do this, Crocodile?!" He was screaming again.

"We are finally united by an ultimate goal: One Piece. And, no don't even dare say that's something only I want, you know that's a lie. You were there when they executed Roger. You wanted it too!"

With a loud fud Buggy fell on the floor from Crocodile's grip. But instead of staying in his rightful place (at ex-warlords' feet), he jumped back on, grabbing Crocodile by the collar of his shirt. Mihawk quickly retained his swords, as Buggy drew their foreheads impossibly close together. "Listen, this could be something. We *all* have qualities the other two lack. I know I'm not as strong as Mihawk or as calculating as you. But do you really believe you could raise an army this size without me? Look inside yourself, beyond your pride and answer me, Croc, do you really honestly think that people would die for you? For Mihawk?"

Crocodile kept quiet, staring at Buggy to convey just how much he wanted to snap his neck in half. On his end, the swordsman remained silent as well.

"Well the correct answer is they *could*. I can make them love you. I can make them want to follow you, as they want to follow me. But I won't. Because you refuse to work together. And you know what's funny? I can see that deep inside you *want to*. Despite all your bravado, you haven't killed me yet, because I'm useful. You don't want to admit it but I am. And the fact that I got it through your thick skull and horrible temper just proves it."

At once Buggy released him.

...

If he was honest, Buggy expected to be dead the second Red Force showed up on the horizon. The second Shanks left their tent. The second he finished his speech to Crocodile. He was bluffing, of course he was.

In moments like this, something just overcame him and it was like he was watching the situation unfold in front of him, as if he was just a spectator and not an active participant. He got enamoured by his own voice and got drunk on listening to himself talk.

With time, whatever that passion was, it seemed to start working on others as well. Everyone thought he was a funny kid when he was part of Roger's Pirates. They laughed at his stories, his fussy attitude, (his nose), but they didn't really take him seriously. Not as seriously as Buggy wanted them to. Rayleigh always scolded him for being so full of himself, saying that

he'd better train how to throw those knives so they always hit bullseye instead of running his mouth.

And then one day Captain found him sulking in the crow's nest after being caught on another particularly embarrassing lie. "You might want to turn those stories down a notch, kid, you know, for the better effect," he winked at him, patting Buggy's head. "You have the skill, just need to work on the content. In the end that's what we'll all become - stories for history to remember. True or untrue won't matter, it's what at the heart of your words that counts. So keep practising."

Oh, that he did. So much so, that right now two of the most powerful men in the world stood in front of him, letting him leave unscratched. Crocodile was a surprise because apparently, shouting contests worked with him. He should've guessed earlier, Buggy thought. The guy was so tall he probably couldn't hear shit if it was spoken at a normal conversational level.

Mihawk on the contrary... That he couldn't even begin making sense of. The pieces he had in front of him didn't make the full picture, so his guess would've been as good as any. Buggy thought to the past week. Hawk-Eyes seemed different after his proclamation about going after the One Piece. Why was he with them before that again? Buggy felt a headache approaching and didn't have it in him to rattle his memory on the swordsman's possible motivations. As far as he was concerned, whatever Crocodile had offered him was a worse deal than One Piece, which in Buggy's eyes could have been almost anything.

As he was approaching his tent he noticed another figure standing in front of it. Reaching for a buggy ball in his pocket he slowed his pace giving himself more time to calculate his next move. Then the person showed their face and Buggy let out an annoyed (and a little relieved) sigh.

"Alvida," he said in the form of a greeting.

"What a day, huh?" So she wasn't going to be polite either, great. Then he could cut straight to the chase (not like he would've done anything differently otherwise).

"What do you want?" He asked, entering his personal quarters.

“Red Hair is here, huh,” Buggy glanced back at her, sending a silent threat if she continued. Alvida decided to disregard it. Bitch. “And you let him dock for the night.”

“I will slice your throat if you don’t start answering my question: what do you want?” Buggy was so done for the day, what was one traitor more or one traitor less?

“I came to apologise,” came a response. Buggy, who had already moved to his wardrobe to take his Emperor attire off was so startled, his head, literally, snapped back at her and floated closer.

“What?!”

“Look, before this whole bullshit happened, we were a crew right? But we had a strict ‘everyone for themselves’ policy. Mostly. And while that worked in East Blue, I don’t see it working on the Grand Line. You keep getting hurt and we keep getting left to fend for ourselves. Others are too much of pussies to admit, but we...” she pursed her lips, next part being particularly hard for her to admit, “... we need our captain”.

“Pff, when he’s a Yonko I wouldn’t imagine otherwise. Unlucky for you I don’t need you.” He added, quietly, after a pause, “There’s nothing you can do for me.”

Alvida studied his face, before sighing and moving to the small dining area with a coffee table and few armchairs. “It’s true that we’re helpless against Hawk-Eyes and Crocodile,” she said, “but we have our ways. We are survivors, Buggy. We know how to persevere. And to endure is all that’s left when there’s nothing you can do to change things.”

“I can though,” Buggy said against his better judgement. Removing his red suit completely, he was left in a white t-shirt and turquoise pants, tied by a belt of a similar shade but lighter in colour. He moved closer to where Alvida was sitting. To hell with his make up - he’ll remove it later, he was too damn tired.

“I convinced them, Alvida. I convinced them to follow *my* dream. I think I actually made it ours. So I don’t need your pity or your shoulder to cry on - I’m a one man band who can wiggle his way out himself.”

She hummed in response. “I will dismiss the fact that most of your power actually comes from how efficiently you can acquire manpower aka becoming the opposite of a one-man band, and focus on another part of that statement. No one said anything about crying on shoulders - your stage make up will ruin all of my shirts. Maximum I can offer is an ear. To listen that is.”

Buggy considered her. Truth be told he liked to talk, but he was also very good at talking to himself. For one, he was a much more interesting conversation partner than Alvida. Although he did miss someone he could bounce his ideas off of... And was that a thinly veiled complement right there when she began talking?

Unsatisfied with his silence, Alvida decided to go for one of her dirty moves. “In the end, I’m the only one who knows about Red Hair...”

“You don’t know shit!” Buggy was too quick to respond. Fuck, that really compromised him.

“I know more than others. Which is surprising, considering Cabaji and Mohji actually met him, right? Those oblivious idiots.”

“I should stop drinking with you,” Buggy mumbled, defeated, just as Alvida produced a bottle of... Sambuca, really, when did it even get there? From under the coffee table.

“There’s a lot of things you should stop doing. Fucking the redhead is one of them. You almost succeeded there as well, not sure it will remain like this after tonight though.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” Buggy chuckled grimly, to which Alvida raised her eyebrows in a silent encouragement to continue. Fuck it. Fuck Her. And especially fuck Shanks (not like that though!).

However, Buggy thought, he might need to let it out. Nothing too personal though, just cold hard facts. Something was troubling him, and he couldn’t figure out what, so maybe recapping the day to Alvida would help. Fuck he hated that she always had her ways.

...

After staying in the room for a while longer with Crocodile, Mihawk was finally released from a grumbling old man who couldn't fathom why he shouldn't be killing the figure head of their whole endeavour. Or rather, pretended not to understand.

Hawk-Eyes was there when Buggy claimed that they were entering the race for the One Piece. He saw a gleam that passed Crocodile's eyes, the memory, that even the other one couldn't suppress. That was the day when they lost their footing, and Mihawk had to admit that to be able to move forward.

He knew almost immediately that bossing the clown around like usual wouldn't work anymore. Both the pirates on the island and Buggy himself had found a second breathing that was hard to deny. Things started to move, and there was no way of stopping them any more. And really, the swordsman didn't want to. For the first time in... a while, he was motivated to do something.

For a long time he felt himself changing. First, it was Zoro and Perona. Now it had become the One Piece. What Mihawk liked the most about the idea is that his sword fights could finally have some meaning again, some... ultimate goal behind them. If Zoro had made good on his promise, well, maybe he could even entertain him once they reached Laugh Tale.

But, most surprising of all was the clown. Especially after the revelation of the day, that he had conqueror's haki. That was something Mihawk could work with. What he wouldn't admit even to himself, is that he missed teaching as well. He missed sharing knowledge, missed talking with purpose. And while he himself didn't have conqueror's haki, he knew enough on the topic that it would be enough. Because it simply had to be.

After making a quick stop at his own tent to shower (that day and that conversation alone had left him feeling filthy), he decided to make his way to the clown's tent. The faster they talk the better. Plus, he still couldn't shake off the feeling that there was another reason for letting Shanks stay. Could it be the poneglyphs? Mihawk distinctly remembered hearing that Red Hair had some, maybe by another miracle that seemed to surround the clown, Buggy could read them? Was he planning on stealing them?

Preoccupied by his thoughts, Mihawk noticed that the clown wasn't alone in his tent a second later than he would prefer. "Huh", he thought, "that's rather unbecoming," and silently moved closer to the tent to listen to the conversation the two inside were having.

"You know, I didn't forget you avoided my question earlier," said a female voice. Mihawk had no recollection of 99% of the people on the island, but somehow this one sounded familiar. He couldn't quite place it though.

"Which one? I avoided many," that was undoubtedly Buggy speaking. Raspy voice, with a little screech, although at an unusually calm, leisurely volume. Was this how Buggy usually spoke when he wasn't angry or terrified (or both)?

"Why did *you* let him stay? You need my help, you need to say it out loud."

An exasperated sigh came before Buggy spoke. "For the record, I don't. Need your help or know why. I guess," there was a long pause in which Buggy took a few calculated breaths. "I guess the sea is dangerous and unforgiving in the storm."

Mihawk had to lean impossibly close to hear the next part, as the woman whispered, "And you?"

"Not so much, apparently," came Buggy's response.

...

Mihawk made a point to enter the tent as loudly as possible. When he did, he finally recognised the woman who was there with Buggy. Alvida, his second in command (co-captain?) quickly rose to her feet and, Hawk-Eyes could not fucking believe his eyes, stood between him and Buggy.

"Sir," she said, tilting her head upwards in a greeting instead of lightly bowing it. Was there something in the air today? Mihawk mused distantly. Behind her a heap of blue hair appeared



showing a rather relaxed clown attached to it. Upon closer inspection, Buggy had that glassy undertone to his eyes which could only mean one thing: they have been drinking and shittalking. Typical.

Ignoring Alvida, Hawk-Eyes addressed Buggy. “Your haki.” He said without a preamble. Buggy squinted his eyes at him. Then he turned to Alvida, saying “Actually, both of us were just leaving.”

“Where?”

Buggy sighed, while Alvida started to look more and more uncomfortable. “Well, Alvida is going to her tent and I... am going for a walk.”

“Does that walk end on board of the Red Force?” Buggy’s eye roll was enough indication that it did. Confirmed in his suspicion he slightly turned his head to Alvida. “You’re going to your tent.” It wasn’t phrased like a question, and yet the woman still had the nerve to look at Buggy for confirmation.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine. Hawk-Eyes and I need to catch up too, apparently.” the other man added to ease the tension.

Giving them one last look Alvida gave it up. “Okay, then,” she moved to the tent’s entrance, throwing back “See you,” before exiting completely.

With that, Buggy turned his attention back to Mihawk, the latter's eyes never leaving the clown. The other man grumbled. “So, what shall we start with: haki or Shanks?”

Mihawk considered it. “Why are you going to him?”

Buggy stood up, moving to his wardrobe to grab one of his numerous capes. A cheap cope out to turn his face away from the swordsman’s all seeing eyes. “I had some remaining questions.”

“Lies.”

“No,” Buggy sent a glare back at him. “I had some remaining *personal* questions.”

“I heard you the first time,” Mihawk moved closer to the clown to stand on the opposite side of him. He should’ve cut his throat just for making him talk to his back, but he wouldn’t. Not right now at least. “You’re not telling the full truth. What happens if you like his answer?”

Moving his hand over the soft fabric of his clothes, Buggy mused. “If I like his answer, huh. You’re right, I had an idea for that.”

“Is it related to his poneglyphs?”

“What? No,” Buggy scoffed, annoying Mihawk. He acted as if the idea was absurd. Why did he try to play the guessing game again, instead of forcing the information out of the clown? Somehow noticing the shift, Buggy elaborated. “I get why you’re asking, but, uh, I’m happy to let you know we won’t be needing those.”

As if assessing Mihawk with his gaze, Buggy looked like he was considering lying or withholding more information from him. Hawk-Eyes was ready to implement Plan B, then Buggy beat him to it. “I know where it is.”

This could not have possibly just come out of his mouth. “Laughtale?” the swordsman hated himself for asking, but, well, in this occasion it only seemed appropriate to check if the clown was in his right mind.

“Yes, “ Buggy chuckled. “Do you think they didn’t draw a map? On Roger’s ship? Ever wondered where it went?” the clown met his eyes, catching Mihawk’s eyebrows slightly raised. “I didn’t steal it if that’s what you’re thinking! Captain gave it to me.”

“Was it with you this whole time? In Impel Down as well?” Mihawk couldn’t imagine how much of an idiot someone had to be to sneak in a map leading to the biggest pirate treasure in

the world to the prison filled with said pirates. He also couldn't imagine the opposite: hiding it somewhere in hopes of coming back to find it untouched later on. But then again, this was Buggy he was talking to.

The idiot in question only laughed. "Nah, I burned it few months after Roger's... after the execution. I was scared shitless they'd find me. And that was captain's treasure so... I'd stare at it each night until I memorised it down to a millimeter, and then I destroyed it and scattered the ashes in the sea."

Burning the last tangible thing that tied Buggy to his captain and crew. People who practically raised him in the cruel waters of the Grand Line. Who were now all dead or hiding or worse, Shanks. Mihawk hated it, but his perception of the clown might have been slowly changing.

It didn't mean the other man needed to know that. "Okay. So you remember it perfectly?"

"I have started making an exact copy, and can tell you that yes, it's definitely correct. It corresponds with what I remember of the end of our journey, up until the last island that is. From where, well, I guess we'll have to blindly trust the memory I tried not to bury for the last 20 odd years," he grinned.

There were still some gaps in Buggy's story, and the plan was far from bulletproof, but Mihawk had to admit - it was already something. There was only one remaining question. "Then what do you need from Shanks?"

Buggy rolled his eyes, giving one last glance to his capes and abandoning them all together, moving to the mirror instead. He sat in front of it to brush through his tangled hair. A light caught on it, and Hawk-Eyes suddenly remembered drunk Shanks and his sap stories. He didn't share much useful information, but he did seem to have a weird fixation on Buggy's hair, which he talked about instead. Looking at it now, its shine under the light, changing the colour from sapphire to almost lake water green, there was definitely something about it, inviting to inspect closer, to touch. Transfixed, Mihawk watched as Buggy collected a few of the strands in front of his face, to make a loose bun out of them at the back of his head. Most of the hair though he left floating over his shoulders.

Noticing the swordsman staring, Buggy met his eyes in the mirror and smirked. “What? One needs to understand for what occasion they're dressing up.”

Eye contact unbreaking, Mihawk asked again, lowering his voice, making the tone just warning enough. “What do you need -”

“Blackbeard.” Buggy replied in one heavy breath, seemingly not interpreting the words as a threat they were but as something different. “He suggested we go against Blackbeard together. That could be good. Red Hair pirates could probably take him out by themselves, but...” the clown stood up giving one last look at his selection of clothes. “But maybe we underestimated him. In any case, it would be a good publicity to be there when he falls.”

“Making these decisions without Crocodile,” Hawk-Eyes hummed. “I was sure you were bluffing earlier, but it seems like you are actually stupid enough to think he won't kill you for this.”

Buggy laughed. “Well, that depends on how I present it to him. I'm not planning to make any final decisions, just to see how much Shanks is actually ready to commit to the plan. If I find his motivation sufficient, I will bring it up to Crocodile tomorrow morning, so he could discuss the details with Red Hair personally, and feel like the big man orchestrating the parade again, like he so desperately wants.”

Mihawk scoffed. “Whatever. I don't have a horse in this race.”

“Don't you?” Buggy's piercing gaze yet again met his, and the swordsman almost wanted to turn away. Almost. Instead all he said was, “Burgundy.”

The clown seemed completely taken aback, blinking at him stupidly.

“The cape. You should wear the burgundy one.” Giving Buggy a second to snap out of his initial stupor and follow through, Mihawk added, “And I'm coming with you. Let's not give the imbeciles any ideas.”

With that he left the tent, expecting Buggy to follow, which the clown did. A walk to Red Force was uneventful, the streets empty, as everyone was hiding from the storm. Buggy tucked his hair under his cape and captain's hat that he had time to grab on his way out. They didn't talk, but Mihawk watched Buggy from the corner of his eye. The other man was shivering, occasionally rubbing his nose and presenting an overall pathetic picture. The swordsman couldn't understand how this was the same man who so effortlessly commanded masses and used untrained conqueror's haki well enough to startle both him and Crocodile.

He didn't have much time to think though as they soon arrived to the harbour, approaching Red Hair's ship.

"Name yourself," they heard one of the other Yonko's men demand.

Clucking his tongue, visibly annoyed by the command Buggy has nonetheless replied in a loud proclamation. "Buggy the fucking Star Clown, your generous host and the Emperor of the seas. I'm here to talk with Shanks."

Obviously surprised by Buggy's familiarity to his captain, the man quickly disappeared before coming back with none other than Benn Beckman. Mentally, Mihawk rolled his eyes. They were going to make this difficult, weren't they?

"My apologies, Emperor," the first mate said, not sounding apologetic at all, "but the captain is not taking visitors at this moment."

"I'm sure he can make an exception, considering how understanding my partners and I were this morning to meet with the two of you, Beckman." Buggy kept talking in a very loud voice, as if competing with the storm for dominance in volume. Hawk-Eyes was on the verge of slicing the clown's mouth in half if he didn't stop assaulting his ears. Granted, they technically had to keep up the appearances of Buggy being his boss, but a few more minutes of this and the swordsman would stop caring.

"I wouldn't be so confident, Buggy. That meeting did not go as smoothly after all."

Buggy was about to shout another retort, making Mihawk ready to get the weapon from his neck to shut him up, when they heard another familiar voice. “Buggy?” Shanks’ head popped up from the railing above them. Judging by his dishevelled look, he has been drinking as well, very likely in higher amounts.

“Yes,” the clown replied, shivering even harder for the show. “Will you let us board for once? I’m here to talk.” Redhead’s eyes became softer when, as if he was ready to forgive Buggy when and where for how the clown (rather cleverly, he had to admit) had played him.

It dawned upon Mihawk then, that maybe this was the reason for his shouting. Clown knew Beckman would never let them on board, but if Red Hair heard him, well that was a different discussion altogether. Or maybe Buggy just got off on being insufferable - either of those options was equally possible, and none of it mattered. As Shanks turned to Beckman the other was already ordering men to bring the ship bow, so that Buggy could easily board.

“Hawk-Eyes as well?” was the only thing Beckman inquired about.

“Now, Benn, why would I board an enemy’s ship without my best attack dog?” Scratch that, Mihawk was going to snap Buggy’s neck in half as soon as they returned.

“No one here will attack you, Bugs, I promise,” Shanks assured, adding more quietly, “I might be *your* enemy, but you are my friend after all.” If Mihawk didn’t know the clown better, he would’ve said he almost looked guilty. Almost.

As they got on board and drew closer to the crew’s private quarters, Shanks turned, looking at Buggy, searching. “Is this a... private conversation or would you prefer Mihawk and Benn to join us? I know we stocked some good wine at our last stop, so you don’t have to worry for Hawk-Eyes, he is more than welcome to explore that.”

“After this whole nonsense, I would prefer to go for a whiskey. I’m sure Beckman can show me there to find what you deem your best,” Mihawk answered for the clown. Whatever Buggy was planning to say, it wasn’t a good idea to let the first-mate hear it, considering his rather antagonistic relationship to the clown.

“Sure,” Buggy replied, finding Mihawk’s eyes and nodding in acknowledgement. “Lead the way,” he then told Red Hair and they disappeared behind the wooden door, undoubtedly going to the captain’s quarters.

...

Behind him, Shanks had closed the door to his personal quarters. For better or worse, it didn’t change much since the last time Buggy had been here. Wooden, king size bed, half-filled bookshelves, liquor cabinet (with subsequent collection of empty bottles right by it) and a table with two armchairs overlooking the sea - all of the furniture seemed quite modest for an Emperor, it had scratches from years of use, and to Buggy’s taste was rather shabby. Shanks had always called it ‘homey’.

Buggy propped himself on one of the armchairs, raising his leg to put his hands over his knee, hugging it tightly. Shanks had followed suit, bringing a bottle that he was no mistake working on before, with him. At least the redhead had some decency to offer Buggy a glass, to which the latter had diplomatically agreed.

“I’m sorry I used my haki on you,” Shanks said after dismissing his own glass, and taking a swing straight from the bottle.

“I’m not going to apologise for anything,” Buggy stated in response, sipping on his drink.

“Okay,” Red Hair said, voice betraying how tired he was, “Where do we go from here?”

And, well, that was a good question. For all he talked about with Alvida, Buggy didn’t exactly know what he really wanted to say. He could just jump straight to business, take Shanks up on his offer to hunt down Blackbeard together, but that didn’t feel right, leaving too many gaps in their previous conversation. So instead he went for the jugular.

“Do you think I’m weak?” He asked, feeling embarrassed and angry all at once. Why did he even care in the first place?

Shanks looked taken aback. It was like he didn't actually expect Buggy to be open, almost vulnerable with him. Then his expression shifted to something that made Buggy want to punch him in the face. "No, of course not," Red Hair said. Thinking better of it, he decided to elaborate, which was good, because Buggy wouldn't have believed him otherwise. "I think you are a great leader, talented in things I could never even begin to understand. You aren't the strongest or, and I'm sorry, bravest fighter, but it's not like you couldn't be. For god's sake you have conqueror's haki and I didn't know anything about it until today. I don't know what stopped you from exploring your potential but-

"You," Buggy interrupted him. "You stopped me. We both knew you'd make a better captain," Shanks was about to protest but the clown didn't let him, "But I wouldn't have let you be a better everything. So yes, I'm aware I have a few winning qualities, glad you know that too." Buggy finished his drink, passing Shanks the glass for a refill, before continuing his interrogation.

"and if I'm such an amazing leader, why did you doubt my success? Why are you here?"

"I told you, it's your vivre card - it almost burned to a crisp."

"I don't believe you," Buggy looked outside the window. Dark clouds sat over the sea with occasional lightning grazing the horizon. Despite the horrendous weather conditions, despite the ship literally being docked at the harbour, Buggy felt calmer than he did in weeks, maybe months. He had always loved the sea, with all of her tribulations, changes and unpredictabilities. Even though she hated him, Buggy could never hate her back - perhaps it was the only unconditional love his life could offer him.

He felt a hand lightly touch his neck before snapping his attention to the man in front of him. Shanks smiled at him sadly, explaining himself but not removing his hand. "You have a bruise there. Couldn't see it in your red suit but now I do. It's about two weeks old, I'd say. You can check in the mirror that I'm not lying." Buggy didn't need to. He knew exactly which bruise Shanks was referring to. Damn it.

"Maybe it's a funjury?" The clown wasn't going to be caught in the lie so easily.

At that Red Hair laughed, but there was no humour behind it. "I didn't know you were into strangling *that much*. Surprising, since I would consider myself quite educated on the topic."



Scoffing, Buggy swatted Shanks' hand away. Instead of retreating completely though, the other man simply caught his hand in his own, intervening them on the table. The light in the cabin was low and soft, so no one would even be able to tell that Buggy's cheeks turned a slight shade of pink.

"In all seriousness though, it does confirm what I was afraid of." Shanks looked at him intently, his gaze hardening. "Please, Buggy, just give me the name."

"So you could go and wreak havoc on my island? As if." he was trying to look anywhere but at the others' eyes.

"I promise not to touch anyone who doesn't deserve it. They're hurting you, Bugs, I beg you. Even if you hate me afterwards, please, just this once, let me help you," Shanks was clutching onto his hand now, and Buggy did have to admit, this sounded a lot like a plea. Shanks was an expert at composing himself, but right now his face was betraying true desperation. Maybe he wasn't drinking himself senseless because he was mad at Buggy. Maybe he was doing that, because he felt like he failed him.

And oh, any other time this would've made Buggy angry. However after today, it felt like all emotions were drained out of him. His rage felt cold, as he clutched Shanks' hand back and made a sudden move towards himself, making the other almost slide across the table with his torso. They were centimetres away from each as Buggy locked his eyes with Shanks'. "To reach a hand down to somebody they need to be *beneath* you. And I am beneath nobody. No matter how it seems, or what you, or Crocodile and Mihawk, or even fucking Rayleigh think, I always come out on top."

Suddenly he felt pressure under his fingers, as if with a snap he could break Shanks' hand, dissect his whole body in fact, that whole room. The armchairs there they sat, the bed there they'd fucked on multiple occasions, the bookshelves filled with trash literature; breaking the glass of liquor bottles and windows, letting the storm swallow them whole. Buggy quickly let go of Shanks, standing up and putting as much distance between them as possible. He thought he heard a voice, barely a whisper, but Red Hair was quiet and as he turned around, no one else was in the room.

Buggy felt himself dropping on the bed, hands over his ears as he willed himself to stop whatever this was. Shanks, an idiot that he was, did not get the clue, immediately falling to Buggy's side. "What is it, Bugs? Are you okay, talk to me."

“I...,” Buggy couldn’t breathe. He didn’t know what was happening but somehow, from deep inside he knew where this was coming from. Shanks, unaware of the pressure Buggy felt tightening around his heart, had nevertheless tried to do something, anything, to stop him from panicking.

...

This was either the worst or the best plan of action Shanks could think of. He wrapped his arm around Buggy, awkwardly sitting down by his side, and putting his head on the other man’s shoulder. “Hey,” he whispered, not sure himself there this was going. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m... I’m really sorry, Buggy. I’ll drop it, I promise, I don’t want to be the one who makes you feel like this... Sorry, this isn’t about me, I’m rumbling.”

“Of course this is about you, do you see any other annoying idiots in this room?” Buggy sighed, rubbing his face. Then, hit by a sudden realisation, he hid his face in his hands. “I still had make-up on, didn’t I?”

“Uhhh, yeah? I don’t see how it’s -” Shanks bit his tongue when Buggy lifted his face. All his eyeliner was smudged around his face, blue mixing with red and other shades Red Hair wasn’t aware were even present there before. He tried his best not to laugh. Unfortunately, trying your best not to laugh was a dead giveaway of wanting to laugh in the first place.

“Don’t laugh!” Buggy protested, but as he seemed more at ease, Shanks decided to at least chuckle anyway.

Buggy mumbled something, likely about him being annoying again, and dramatically marched into the bathroom, hiding behind another door near the bed.

As soon as the door shut behind him. Shanks let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding and fully dropped his body on the bed. How were they going to fix all of this? Earlier, when they had returned to the ship, Benn had asked him if it had been time to give up. His best friend, who despite his gnaring dislike for his childhood companion had nevertheless always been on Shanks’ side, had finally drawn the line. Maybe Benn had seen Buggy as a threat for

the first time, but knowing the first mate that probably wasn't the case. Likely, this just proved to him that Buggy was a lost cause. But this wasn't how Shanks saw it.

For the last decade Red Hair had been nothing but respectful of Buggy's wishes. In spite of what Crocodile seemed to believe, he could take a hint, which is exactly what he did when Buggy left him in East Blue.

He knew he'd crossed the line that day, trying to convince Buggy to lay off the civilians from the island the other had been occupying. He still remembered him screaming, shaking Shanks by the collar of his shirt. "Not all of us had been found in treasure chests! Some had to live the real life first! And this is what happens in real life: you feed off of others to survive yourself." Shanks had disagreed, of course he did: his beloved childhood friend, whom he'd only been seeing in those fleeting moments after their separation had become a low-tier tyrant. Buggy just said he was doing the same thing World Government did, just more efficiently. That if Shanks was so keen on teaching Buggy a lesson, he might be more interested in preaching those same ideals to the Celestial Dragons. Shanks didn't say anything.

However, when he was walking around Karai Bari today, Shanks was surprised to see that people, even civilians seemed genuinely satisfied with their lives, sincere in their adoration for Buggy. How very curious, he thought. And how very dangerous if Buggy became Crocodile and Mihawk's pawn. Shanks winced. Despite the real tangible evidence he had, his friend seemed to have some actual power (or should he say leverage?) over the two ex-warlords. He was reminded of Buggy's words. Could it be? No, Shanks decidedly shook his head, they wouldn't have. Don't get him wrong, Buggy was absolutely beautiful, in a way that shouldn't have made sense yet that one couldn't really deny. But that wouldn't have been enough, would it? Crocodile would chop off his other hand faster than ever considering having feelings for someone as expressive as Buggy, and Mihawk, well... Shanks wasn't even sure Mihawk had feelings to begin with. He did consider swordsman a friend, at least until the recent developments, but in all their years knowing each other he was, to say it nicely aloof. Although he had followed Buggy to the Red Force, and during the meeting...

The door to the bathroom swung open, interrupting Red Hair's train of thought. "Okay, disclaimer," Buggy stepped out and he found himself forgetting how to breathe appropriately. "My make-up was ruined completely, so I had to take it all off. Used some of your towels pretty excessively, but I'm sure you don't mind." His friend made his way back to the bed. After a few more seconds of Shanks not replying, Buggy had raised his eyebrows in question, already getting defensive.

He rushed to clear the air. “Sorry, I just hadn’t seen you without makeup in ages. You’ve changed.”

“Are you calling me old?” Buggy almost screeched.

“Well, we aren’t 20 no more,” Shanks chuckled. It was funny to tease him, but he felt like he should be more careful with that after the day’s events. “But that’s not what I meant. I guess it’s just... nice to know you have laugh lines. Means everything wasn’t so bad after all.” Still lying on his back, he reached a hand up, to trace them with his fingers. “Plus I always liked your face,” he added in a soft voice.

Buggy’s eyes locked with his, studying Shanks. After a few moments he sighed, as if defeated. “You know, you really make it hard doing business with you, Shanks.”

“Doing business-”

“I came here to talk about Blackbeard. I’m willing to consider your proposition.” Shocked, Red Hair moved to sit down, but his movement was blocked by Buggy’s hand on his shoulder, keeping him in place. “But,” Buggy continued, slowly lowering himself, “you make it complicated to stay on track.”

Only as the other’s eyes shifted to his lips, Shanks breathed out, before cupping Buggy’s face and finally closing the gap between them.

It had been so long. Kissing Buggy again, after all these years, made Shanks’ head spin. He forgot how good it felt. Maybe if he knew their last kiss had been their last all these years ago, he would’ve tried remembering it better. Or felt more motivated to follow Buggy across the whole of the ocean if necessary, just to taste his lips sooner. Buggy seemed to share the sentiment.

There was no gentleness in his kisses, as Buggy brought their lips together again and again, as if a drowning man, begging to steal all the air from Shanks’ lungs. And by god would he be happy to oblige.

Moving his arm to lay across the other's back, Shanks used the momentum to flip them over, so that now Buggy was lying underneath him. He didn't waste a moment to crush their lips together again, before moving lower, kissing and nipping at Buggy's jaw, neck, collarbone. He tried tugging the collar of Buggy's t-shirt lower, to reveal more of his skin, but was batted away by the other's hands. "Don't stretch it!" Buggy complained, motioning him to get up a little, so he could take off both his cape and t-shirt. Shanks decided to use this moment to lose his shirt as well, and after a second both of them were sitting there half naked, staring at each other almost hypnotised. Rather unbecoming of two Yonkos to get so lost in another, Shanks distantly thought. At the front of his mind, however, was only Buggy. Buggy, who was now reaching over, moving his hand along Shanks' skin, tracing and memorising the new scars, gently rubbing his hand over the old ones.

On his end, Shanks was greeted with a different picture. Buggy's body, never scarred, always too clean for a pirate of his experience, was now littered with yellow bruises, signalling that he must have gotten them around a week ago. His heart ached, and hands itched to grab the sword and tear the confession out of somebody, anybody, so he could show the bastard who did this what happened when they thought they could touch Buggy.

Instead, he took both of the other's hands in his, and brought them over his head, right above the halo of blue hair splattered on the bed. Before Buggy could ask, Shanks brought his lips to the bruise on his right shoulder, kissing it as gently as he could, earning himself a small gasp out of the other's lips. He was about to move to the next one, before he heard a low, "Shanks," coming from Buggy. Yet his voice sounded more pleading than threatening, so Shanks moved anyway, kissing another bruise, on his abdomen, before meeting Buggy's eyes. "I want to make you feel good, to take care of you."

He thought he might've made the wrong move, saying that, but then he saw Buggy swallow, his Adam's apple moving, before he quickly turned away. "You better make it quick then. People are waiting for us."

Shanks moved up, to be face to face with Buggy when he whispered, "They can wait longer. As far as I'm concerned, this meeting is getting quite productive, for once."

He earned a kick in the shin for that, but in all honesty Shanks didn't care. He brought their lips back together again, licking inside Buggy's mouth, swallowing his soft moan, before moving back to the task he had set out for himself.

...

Mihawk had forgotten that unlike his captain, Beckman could be quiet for impressive amounts of time. And while this would've been welcomed any other time, this night the swordsman would rather the other man talked, so he could gather at least some intel.

Finally, he thought, as Beckman opened his mouth, yet of course he had to direct the conversation away from himself. "Why are you here Hawk-Eyes?" was all the first mate asked.

"To see to the clown staying alive on an enemy's ship." He gave the obvious response, to which Beckman only hummed.

"To be honest, I could never quite imagine you sailing under anybody, let alone Buggy."

The other man was obviously trying to get a rise out of Mihawk, which was a surprising tactic for the first mate. Hawk-Eyes didn't have any ill intent towards Beckman, but he didn't appreciate the implication. "Of course you couldn't," he simply responded and that was the end of their conversation for what felt like the next hour and a half.

After that, they had finally heard familiar voices coming from the deck, meaning that Buggy and Red Hair had finally emerged from their meeting.

Following Beckman on their way back, Mihawk wondered what kind of state he would find the two Emperors in. What he didn't expect however, was for both of them to be in such an uplifted mood. He made a mental note that Buggy's hairstyle had changed, as the clown had seemingly untied his bun with all of his hair now cascading down his shoulders. Small detail but the one that drove Mihawk back into the territory of assumptions about the two.

"Captain," Beckman called out to Shanks.

“Clown,” Hawk-Eyes decided to mirror him. The bastard was so relaxed, that as he moved his eyes to the swordsman he even dared to joke. “That is my title, but I’ll be honest, I liked how you called me ‘Captain’ back at the meeting as well.”

(Mihawk had liked it too) He would kill the idiot clown.

Chuckling at Buggy’s words, Shanks turned his attention to Mihawk and for a second it felt like the Yonko recognised something in him, as his eyes narrowed and smile got that malicious tilt to it. And then it was gone the moment Red Hair got his attention back on Buggy. “Well then, we will see each other tomorrow to discuss the arrangements with all of the Cross Guild present. Will someone let Crocodile know the earlier he wakes up the earlier we will be out of here?”

“This is none of your concern,” Buggy said a little too happily. “Someone will tell you the time you’re to show up.”

Shanks smiled in a way that Mihawk was realising was solely reserved for Buggy. He then asked Beckman to help arrange the brow to make a passageway back to land for the two of them, instead of finding some of his other men to do this. What a job for a captain and his first mate. Shanks was truly losing his marbles around the clown.

As if to confirm his thoughts, when they stepped on the brow, Shanks suddenly took Buggy’s hand in his, bringing it to his lips and giving it a parting kiss. “See you,” he said, grinning, before once again turning his attention to Mihawk, who stared at this public display with a frown. When their eyes caught each other again, that same gleam from before in them. But this time Mihawk recognised the threat for what it was. “Just you try,” the eyes said, and the swordsman raised his brow at the revelation. Behind the three of them Benn Beckman was rolling his eyes so far that it shouldn’t have been humanly possible.

“You will,” Buggy replied, snapping Hawk-Eyes out of his thoughts.

As they descended back to the dock, walking down the harbour, Mihawk mused about what this alliance, if they could even call it that, might bring them. “You know,” the clown said conversationally, a slight tease in his tone betraying the nature of the statement, “I never realised yours and Red Hair’s rivalry wasn’t limited to swordfights.”

Then Buggy glanced back at him, Mihawk used his trump card and instead of replying, just smirked at the clown, making the latter snap his head back so fast he was surprised he didn't break it.

Breathing out, the swordsman looked up at the sky. It was clear and starry again, over Karai Bari island.

And no, Mihawk thought, he never realised that either.



## End Notes

did you notice that Brennan Lee Mulligan quote I let slip in? I felt like I had to since it felt so Buggy!

anyway, thank you for reading, please leave comments and kudos if you liked it :)

also want to shout out all the amazing Shuggy creators who gave sm inspiration to this fic <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!